DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 506 PS 020 112

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TITLE Toward an Evaluation Framework for Statewide Parent Education.
INSTITUTION South Carolina Univ., Columbia. Coll. of Education.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Midwestern Association for the Education of Young Children (Des Moines, IA, April 17-20, 1991). Typed on colored paper.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Development; *Delivery Systems; Evaluation Criteria; *Family Programs; Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Education; Parenting Skills; Pilot Projects; Preschool Children; Preschool Education; *Program Evaluation; Public Policy; Research Methodology; *School Readiness; State Programs; *Statewide Planning; Success; Toddlers
IDENTIFIERS *South Carolina

ABSTRACT

Ways to approach the evaluation of South Carolina's Parent Education Program are examined. The program's purpose is to improve children's school success by strengthening the family, particularly during the children's first 5 years. Program goals are to: (1) demonstrate effective methods of parent training and support that will enable parents to excel in their role as the principle teachers of their preschool children; (2) develop and coordinate appropriate services based on the growth and development of the child; (3) improve the education, skills, and employment of parents; and (4) assure preschool developmental screening for all children whose families are served. Pilot projects of the program are guided by several key components, including parent training, parent and family services, literacy training and other forms of adult training, and developmental screenings. The application of Jacob's five-level program evaluation design in combination with other methodologies for the evaluation of South Carolina's program provides an example of the way in which a statewide assessment framework might emerge. Needs assessment, common delivery systems, parent and family support, interagency collaboration, staff training, and a focus on at-risk families are common evaluation methods. The need for pilot project evaluations to focus on descriptive data is noted. Strategies to ensure that all components are integrated into an effective design are suggested for longitudinal evaluations. Contains 10 references. (LB)

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Toward An Evaluation Framework For Statewide Parent Education

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Evaluating Statewide Parent Education Programs: A Framework

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A Comprehensive Approach To Parent Education Evaluation

*Inclusive As Opposed To Exclusive

*Formative Emphasis To Nurture Development

*Summative Focus For Continuing Feedback

*Content Focus To Relate Activity To Parent Needs

*Process Focus To Explore Program/Parent Dynamics

South Carolina's Target 2000 Parent Education Program

*Overview

*Mission And Goals

*State Mandated Program Guidelines

-Common Program Components

-Common Program Methods

-Process Approach Through Pilot Projects

-Local Creativity Within Guidelines

-Long-Range Plan For State Adoption

A Parent Education Evaluation Framework

*Jacob's 5-Level Evaluation System

*Needed Evaluation Methods

*"Core Components" Of S.C. Program

*"Common Methods" Of S.C. Program

Jacob's 5-Level Program Evaluation System

*I. Preimplementation

*II. Accountability

*III. Program Clarification

*IV. Progress Toward Objectives

*V. Program Impact

Needed Evaluation Methods

*Process Orientation (Quantitative/Qualitative)

*Data Management (Key Elements)

*Interpretive Analysis

"Core Components" Of South Carolina PEP

*Parent Training

*Parent/Family Support Services

*Literacy/Adult Training

*Developmental Screening

"Common Methods" Of South Carolina PEP

*Needs-Assessment

*Common Delivery Systems

*Parent/Family Support

*Interagency Collaboration

*Staff Training

*At-Risk Family Focus

*Documentation/Evaluation

Evaluating The Pilot Projects

*Comprehensive Evaluation Perspectives

*Multiple Evaluation Tools

*Key Elements In Evaluating Pilots

Toward A Longitudinal Evaluation Plan

*Role Of Pilot Project Evaluations

*Emergence Of Data Management System

*Longitudinal Evaluation Considerations

Toward An Evaluation Framework For Assessing Statewide Parent Education Programs: A Summary

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The evaluation of parent education programs is critical to furthering our understanding of how various designs can be strengthened. Recent advancements in the use of multidimensional evaluation in different social sciences have fostered more creative program and assessment perspectives (Chen, 1990). In particular, parent education evaluations are attempting to promote a more defined sense of program-parent sensitive processes and to thus foster a more proactive orientation among parent educators.

Five elements of effective and meaningful parent education evaluation are: inclusiveness, formative and summative strategies, and content/process factors. Parent education evaluation needs to be **inclusive** by design; attempting to attend to the many variables, nuances and processes that comprise this challenging and complex field (Jacobs, 1988). It also requires the use of **formative** strategies that can account for the many program-parent dynamics that emerge during (not simply after) the implementation (Powell, 1988). **Summative** evaluations are also important, preferably linked to formative activities and functioning as a means of continual feedback to program leaders (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). Within this formative-summative structure a dual focus is needed on **content** and **process**

variables: providing essential perspectives on the substance and human dynamics of programs (Powell, 1988).

Considerations In Evaluating South Carolina's Parent Education Program

The basic purpose of *South Carolina's Parent Education Program* is to improve children's school success through strengthening the family (birth - five years of age). Specifically, the stated goals are:

*To demonstrate effective methods of parent training and support that will enable parents to excel in their role as the principle teachers of their preschool children.

*To develop and coordinate appropriate services based on the growth and development of the child.

*To improve the education, skills, and employment of parents.

*To assure preschool developmental screening for all children whose families are served.

In carrying out these goals, the focus is on the use of "pilot projects" as an arena for exploring various designs and strategies. These projects are guided by the following:

***Key program components** include parent training, parent/family services, literacy/adult training and developmental screenings.

***Common program methods** include needs assessment, delivery systems, parent/family support, interagency collaboration, staff training, focus on at-risk families, and an evaluation/documentation system.

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***Pilot project experimentation** with different designs and strategies within the key components and common methods guidelines.

As the design indicates, the *South Carolina Program* is focused on a process-oriented approach.

Toward An Evaluation Framework

Recent parent education evaluations reflect a move toward more comprehensive and viable schemes. The *Missouri Parents As Teachers* project has provided context data on children's developmental status that is more complete than past assessments (Pfannenstiel & Seltzer, 1985). Evidence of further elaboration of the evaluation process is seen in the *Prenatal And Early Infancy Project* (Olds, 1988). Through the use of a comprehensive design, data on child, parent, parent-child, family functioning, and informal/formal social support are interrelated with program processes and outcomes. Additional ecological assessment factors are being closely examined by Powell (1988); particularly with regards to program-participant dynamics. With the evolution of more ecological designs has come a new conceptual basis for shaping and carrying out the evaluation process.

Of particular significance is Jacobs' (1988) multi-level program evaluation scheme. This 5-Level system provides a viable foundation for moving toward an evaluation framework for large-scale programs such as South Carolina's. Smaller parent education efforts will also find this design very useful in articulating both program and evaluation elements. The design depicts a 5-Level match between (and within) program and development needs: Preimplementation, Accountability, Program Clarification, Progress Toward Objectives, and Program Impact. This system (which has drawn from the work of many parent/family education studies) accounts for the emerging data elements that occur within program development and for the

interactional nature of program-participant dynamics. Further it is structured to support the needed formative evaluation processes that are predominate in pilot projects, the articulation of critical data elements for tracking process and outcome factors, and the development of functional longitudinal evaluation schemes.

The work of Powell, 1988, 1989) and others (See Weiss & Jacobs, 1988 for a comprehensive source) provides additional substance to an emerging framework through the articulation of a 3-Level methodology system. The methods (descriptive data, data management, and analytic research) provide a means for actualizing comprehensive evaluations.

The application of Jacobs' 5-Level design combined with appropriate methodologies to the evaluation of South Carolina's program provides an example of how such a statewide assessment framework might emerge. *South Carolina's Program* has **four core components** that require continual assessment within an ecological context: parent training, parent/family support services, literacy/adult training, and developmental screening. In addition, the program has identified **seven common methods** that should permeate the work of local projects: needs assessment, common delivery systems, parent/family support, interagency collaboration, staff training, an at-risk family focus, and a system for carrying out appropriate documentation and evaluation. These **core components** and **common methods** can be thoroughly field-tested in the pilot projects selected to experiment with the overall goals of the program. Given the experiences of comparable state programs, the pilot project evaluations might best focus on the processes articulated in Levels 1 & 2 of Jacobs' design (Eilwood, 1988). The types of information needed at these levels correspond logically and ecologically with the likely contexts of the pilot projects. Also, the descriptive dimension of the evaluation should be the initial focus of data collection. At this stage of program evolution rich descriptions are needed on elements such as: needs identification strategies, parent training experiences, varying delivery systems, interagency collaboration activities and other process factors.

In effect, the evaluation design must relate the ecological dimension of the study process to the formative experiences of the pilot projects. Through the use of this approach, short-term descriptive assessments can produce data that strengthen the basis for evaluating outcomes of a longitudinal nature. It also assures that the process reflect the real experiences of staff and parents involved in the project's evolution.

The Pilot Projects: Toward An Evaluation Orientation

Pilot project evaluations such as South Carolina's need to focus on descriptive data that are integral to the mission, core components and common methods of the programs being field-tested. Using a multi-level (Jacobs, 1988), ecological (Powell, 1988, Dym, 1988) approach, pilot project assessments can focus on data typically collected in Levels 1 & 2 of Jacobs' design. Descriptive, interpretive and analytic assessment tools and perspectives should be used to support this focus. The following are important factors in the South Carolina pilot projects being studied:

*Key elements of the statewide mission as they are being implemented by the pilot's.

*Local experimentation with the **core components** and **common methods** as they were articulated in the state mandate.

*Comparative analysis of pilot project findings with similar programs in other states.

*Internal program-process evaluation with regards to each pilot's experiences in program development.

Utilizing indicators implied in Levels 1 & 2 in Jacobs design, pilot projects can assess their experiences with regards to: mission, design, activities, participation patterns, project resources, and early effectiveness data. For example, within the

construct of "mission" programs can examine the following:

*What is it they hope to achieve?

*What needs are they trying to meet?

*How are they hoping to meet these needs?

Likewise, issues such as the following are worth exploring in the "design" category:

*What is the initial design?

*How was the design shaped and by whom?

*What changes have taken place during the project's early implementation?

A similar process can be carried out with all of the major elements of the pilot projects.

Of critical importance in this process is the analysis of the core components and common methods of each of the pilot projects. Questions such as the following need to be fully explored during the pilot project phase.

*What **activities and services** are being delivered by the projects **within each of the core components** (parent training, parent/family services, literacy/adult training, developmental assessments)?

*Who is involved in the delivery of these services and activities?

*How are the services and activities being delivered?

*Who is participating in the services and activities?

*What are the participation patterns of those participating in project services?

Additional issues need to be explored within the 'effectiveness' dimension of the projects, particularly regarding the various **common methods** used to achieve program goals.

*What **methodologies** (home-visits, group meetings as examples) are being used to achieve project goals?

*What **training experiences** are staff receiving to prepare them for achieving effectiveness with different methodologies?

*How are **project resources** being deployed to best achieve goals?

*Is a **"balance"** being achieved between services provided to children and to parents?

*How are **interagency services** being coordinated and delivered?

*What **strategies** are being used to **engage parents** in the project's decision making process?

*How are projects **documenting and evaluating** their emerging process and design elements?

Pilot project evaluations provide perhaps the most amenable and fertile arena for exploring the dynamics of program evolution and for examining the critical intricacies of program/parent relationships. Ideally the data generated from this

process should provide a foundation for the emergence of long-term assessment plans.

Toward A Longitudinal Evaluation Perspective

Stakeholders in large scale parent education efforts like South Carolina's want effectiveness and impact data. Three sources usually have a strong influence on the emerging structure of long-term evaluation: state mandated program elements, professional evaluation criteria, and local program development as actualized in the form of pilot projects. These sources interact to create the process and parameters from which long-term evaluation emerges.

In a similar manner the components of pilot project assessments, longitudinal evaluation, and data management systems should interrelate to provide a design that addresses the evaluation needs. In South Carolina's case, all three components must relate to and reflect the broad mission, key components, and common methods of the state's mandate. Yet each component has a unique role to play. To assure that all of the components are integrated into an effective design the following strategies are suggested:

*Develop a "working paper" on possible directions for the longitudinal evaluation. This paper should include pilot project findings (where complete or where in process), mandated data elements (usually articulated in the program's legislation), and research findings from projects of a similar nature.

*Finalize the "focus" of the plan through stakeholder input and through feedback and results from the individual pilot projects.

*Field-test the plan through the pilot project evaluation process. This field-testing should focus on refining program direction and the evaluation process itself.

In carrying out evaluation of parent education an ecological, multi-dimensional perspective must be maintained. It is important that evaluation schemes promote the integrity of programs. The ultimate goal is to nurture the kinds of experiences that empower parents and children; engaging them in mutually responsive and rewarding activities.

What Can Be Learned From Statewide Efforts?

Evaluations of various parent education efforts have provided many insights related to program outcomes, parent/family needs, the value of "services" to particular populations, usefulness of different strategies in different contexts, and some data of value to conceptualizing the possible long-term influences of programs on children (White, 1988; Powell, 1989; Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). Perhaps the most significant contribution of the evaluation process has been the important questions raised in this analytic process. While outcome factors have predominated past evaluations, a new and more comprehensive perspective is evolving with regards to the potential for examining process factors.

Large scale parent education evaluation schemes have a unique role to play in promoting a highly sensitive understanding of parenting, parent-child relationships, and family wellness variables as they might emerge within the creative efforts of community projects. Unfortunately (and to a large degree in response to funding pressures), a myopic image of the evaluation process has limited large-scale assessments to mostly outcome factors. While elements such as improved parenting, increased school success, and stronger family-school partnerships are critical to the field's knowledge base, even more critical is the exploration of the "processes" that underlie such advancements and the assessment of the "dynamics" of how these processes influence the entire family's wellness status.

In this sense, statewide parent education evaluations can especially contribute

to a better understanding of issues such as the following:

*What are the intricacies of how programs arrive at their missions, in both the sense of macro and micro level dynamics?

*What processes (at macro and micro levels) are used to arrive at program priorities; and, who, what, and how are these processes actually carried out in projects?

*What are the dynamics of actually implementing programs, what, who and how are these program systems carried out?

*How are staffing, funding, and training issues integrated into program development and evaluation; and, what influences do they have on the multiple variables that comprise successful program development?

There are many other issues that deserve attention with regards to the "program/process" elements in parent education. Unfortunately, reliance on outcome-oriented designs has clouded the need for more critical analyses of process variables. The status of parent education, as it emerges in future years, can be strengthened through the use of multi-dimensional, ecological evaluation schemes. A highly inclusive approach is needed so that we can truly depict what is possible within high quality parent education programs.

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